

HOLY CROSS ORTHODOX CHURCH

THROUGH THE CROSS JOY HAS COME INTO ALL THE WORLD

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14 NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS

Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick



Around this time of year, many people start thinking about ways they can change for the better. While New Year's resolutions are not particularly a feature of the Orthodox faith, change certainly is, and resolving to change based on times and seasons is certainly part of our liturgical tradition. So adapting the cultural custom of New Year's resolutions to become a better Orthodox Christian seems

perfectly fine to me. Anyway, here are some suggestions for Orthodox Christians resolving to change for the better in the New Year, things every Orthodox Christian can do.

(Obviously, adjust as needed according to the direction of your father-confessor and pastor.)

1. GET SERIOUS ABOUT COMING TO CHURCH (MORE).

While many who read this are no doubt at least every-Sunday attenders at church, it is statistically true that only 26% of Orthodox Christians in America come to church weekly (the statistic is drawn from people who are actually involved in parish life, not from anyone who was ever baptized Orthodox; that statistic would be much worse). That's really a horrible percentage. If you're not coming to church weekly, why not? There are probably some good reasons out there, but most of those 74% almost certainly do not have good reasons. If you're not serious about coming to church weekly, it's time to get serious. This is eternal life we're talking about, not a religious club.

And if you're already coming to church weekly, consider adding at least one service per week. Most parishes are doing Vespers and/or Matins at least once a week (usually Saturday night or Sunday morning). What are you normally doing when those services are going on? Your priest and other parishioners are there praying, including praying for you. Why don't you join them? You won't regret it.

And while we're at it...

2. COME TO CHURCH ON TIME.

It's kind of an in-joke that Orthodox people are always late to church. But why is that?

We too often accept the excuse that we function on "Greek time" or "Syrian time," etc., but even Greeks and Syrians (and whoever else; insert your preferred culture here) seem to be able to adapt to show up to nearly everything else on time. Why can we show up on time for work, sporting events, movies, doctor's appointments, etc., but reserve our tardiness for an encounter with the King of Kings?

There are some kinds of events for which it doesn't much matter if you come at a particular time—parties, various kinds of social gatherings, etc.—but church services aren't one of them. There is a definite beginning and a definite ending. If you show up late, you are late. And if you leave early, you are skipping out.

What you show up on time for tells the world what you find important. It's what you find indispensable. And when you show up late to church, it also tells your fellow parishioners that you don't consider church very important.

And it also communicates it to your kids. And you can be assured that they will imitate you.

Come at least ten minutes early. That says you are serious. You know what also says you're serious?

3. TITHE.

Nothing says you're serious like giving 10% of your income to something.

Giving 10% to God sounds crazy to a lot of people, but the reality is that it's actually totally normal for many Christians—even for generations. Orthodox people in the US aren't used to tithing (10%) or even giving some other percentage, mainly because many of their forebears across the sea gave to their churches just by paying their taxes. That doesn't work anywhere in the English-speaking Orthodox world. Your taxes do not go to support your church. (I know of one church where a parishioner was shocked to discover that the electric company would turn off the electricity if the church didn't pay its bill. Who would do that to a church?)

And other parishioners inherited a system based on union dues. So many may think that giving \$500 a year (less than \$10/week) is a lot. But if you have a parish of 100 families and each family only gives \$500 a year, then you only have an annual income of \$50,000. With that, you cannot support your priest, and you certainly cannot pay for a building and its maintenance. Other people are picking up the slack for you. If they're not, your priest may be on food stamps or welfare. I know some who are.

But if those 100 families each made the median household income for the US (about \$52,000), and they all tithed, that same 100-family parish would have \$520,000 to work with. If they even gave just 5%, they'd have \$260,000.

Meanwhile, you are probably spending a lot more just on cable TV. Or Internet access. Or your smartphone. Or eating out. Or coffee. Or a lot of other things.

But the most important thing about pledging and tithing is not about meeting parish budgets or supporting your priest like the hardworking, educated man he is. It's about worship. Your heart is where your treasure is (Matt. 6:21). Where's your treasure? Follow the money, find the heart.

If you're not up for 10% yet, then try 8%. Or 6%. Or whatever. But go on record, and get disciplined about giving. Don't give until it hurts, but until it actually feels good.

4. PRAY AT HOME.

Even if all you do is say the "Our Father" when you wake up (saying it three times a day is the most ancient known prayer rule), you will notice a change in how you think

and feel about your faith. It will become more present for you and will define you more.

Oh, and, parents? It will have a huge impact on your kids. Watching parents pray at home and (in time) joining them in that prayer is one of the biggest contributions that kids can receive toward their long-term spiritual viability.

If you don't bring the faith home, you can forget about it mattering in the long run, either for you or your kids.

5. SING ALONG AT CHURCH. AND STAND MORE.

The choir and chanters are there to lead you in prayer, not to entertain you or pray instead of you. Yes, it is possible to pray with them silently, but there are few things more spiritually invigorating than singing your prayers. So if you're able, you should.

And while you're at it, why don't you stand up a bit more? It's certainly easier to sing while standing. And it's also the 2000-year-old tradition of the Orthodox Church to stand during worship. So there's that.

Update: I've received several comments which include strong opinions on the issue of congregational singing. I know that it's a subject of some debate. Obviously, this note of encouragement here is meant to be taken in terms of the caveat I originally posted at the top of this piece—check with your father-confessor and/or pastor as to what is appropriate in your community.

Because I'm not interested in hosting a debate about congregational singing, I won't be publishing any further comments about it.

6. MEMORIZE A PSALM.

Memorizing Scripture is a great thing for many reasons, but psalms are especially powerful, because they are all prayers. Pick your favorite one to memorize. Lots of Orthodox love Psalm 50 ("Have mercy on me, O God..."). But there are plenty to choose from. Pick a short one or a long one. Just make it your own. Try praying it every day.

7. ENCOURAGE YOUR PRIEST.

Yes, he should be willing to do his job without getting any encouraging words. And many priests do. That wouldn't be so bad if they didn't get so many complaints. While some priests (like me!) aren't constantly barraged with complaints, some never can seem to escape them, even while they pour their lives out for their people. And I would actually have to say that I probably get more com-

plaints than I do encouraging words. My brother priests mostly say the same thing.

Your priest is a human being just like you are. And while he shouldn't live for praise, you can help him see that his hard work is appreciated by telling him so. Your job isn't to tell him that he shouldn't want praise—he has a father-confessor to tell him that. Your job is to love him. And saying encouraging things to him is part of that love. You don't have to shower him with compliments. Just tell him that what he's doing matters to you.

I have some people in my parish who say encouraging things to me. I don't live for their kind words, but they help to keep me going, because it reminds me that what I'm doing matters.

There is nothing better for a parish's health than an encouraged priest. If he feels like what he's doing matters, he will love doing it. And he will also strive to get better at it, too. So even if you do feel like he needs to improve, the best way to help him do that is to inspire him, not to complain at him.

8. INVITE SOMEONE TO CHURCH.

Did you know that 82% of the unchurched say that they would come if invited? Did you know that only 2% of church members invite someone to church in a given year? (source)

If your parish is dying (and many Orthodox parishes in the US, especially in the Northeast, are indeed dying), don't you think it's time you invited someone to church? If your parish is healthy, don't you think it's time it gave birth to another healthy one?

Do you really believe that you've found the true faith, seen the true light and received the heavenly Spirit, like you sing near the end of the Liturgy?

Then why are you keeping it to yourself? Think of at least one person you know who isn't in church. Make him or her a spiritual priority this year. Pray every day for that person. And when the time is right, give the invitation. Statistically speaking, they are probably going to say yes.

And when you make the invitation, don't say, "You should come to church with me sometime." "Sometime" is no time. Say, "We're celebrating the Divine Liturgy this Sunday at 9am at my church. Can I pick you up and bring you with me?"

9. VISIT A MONASTERY.

You won't believe how amazing monastic visits are until you go on one. There are few things that underline for us how much is really possible in the Christian life like visiting people who are actually making a go at being 24/7/365 Christians.

And don't you think that people who practice prayer that much might know a thing or two about it?

Monasteries aren't just for monks and nuns. They're for all Christians. They are not only spiritual havens but also spiritual powerhouses. And don't just visit once and say you did it. Develop a relationship.

And maybe if you're really blessed, one of your kids will join a monastery and pray for you a whole lot. I hope one of mine does.

10. READ THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Yes, we should read the whole Bible, but the truth is that most Orthodox Christians are crypto-Marcionites—we don't know almost anything about the Old Testament. Marcion was a 2nd century heretic who taught that the Old Testament was a book for Jews and had nothing to do with Christians. He was really wrong. The Old Testament is about the thousands of years of preparation before the coming of Jesus Christ. It is what sets the stage for His appearance. Jesus is everywhere in the Old Testament, but you have to know how to look for Him.

The Old Testament is filled with all kinds of fascinating stories, prayers, songs, poetry, etc. But most of us have almost no idea that it has much other than Adam and Eve, Noah and Jonah. And we're probably a little fuzzy on some of those details.

But if God prepared the world for the coming of Jesus by what He did in the Old Testament, how can we think we'll be prepared for His coming into each of our own lives without any of that same preparation?

Want a plan that will get you through the whole Bible in one year? Here's one. There are others, too.

If you need help getting through it all (especially because it's way bigger than the New Testament), why don't you ask your priest to start a Bible study going over some of the Old Testament books? He'll probably be smiling so much after he gets up off the floor in shock that he won't know what to do with himself.

So, that makes me think of something else.

11. ATTEND AN ADULT EDUCATION CLASS.

It's actually kind of crazy how uneducated many Orthodox people are in their own faith. I sometimes hear the excuse that that stuff is just for seminarians and clergy, that it's too intellectual, too far above the heads of the average parishioner, etc. But the very same people can give you detailed information about what the rules and records in the Super Bowl are, what their least favorite politician has done to wreck the country, and what the latest gossip is on various celebrities, all in remarkable detail. But when it comes to what will last into eternity, we are suddenly the dumbest people on the face of the earth.

Don't sell yourself short. You are probably pretty smart about many things. Why don't you use that same talent to get smart about your faith?

It's also quite frankly true that most Protestants are far more educated about their Protestant faiths than Orthodox are about their own. Are we really supposed to believe that Protestants are just smarter? They're not. But they've developed a culture of education. A culture of education is not a uniquely Protestant thing. It's Orthodox, too. It's been part of our tradition for 2000 years. It's just that some of us have forgotten it. It's time to bring it back.

12. VOLUNTEER.

Do something in your parish or in your community that benefits other people without giving you any kind of material gain. And do it without expecting recognition. Your recognition will come from God in His Kingdom. You don't need it from anyone else.

Not only will selfless volunteering help you be grateful for all that God has given to you, but it will set an example of what a Christian is for your kids and your friends, and it will also help you to be humble, something we know is necessary for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

13. GO TO CONFESSION.

There are lots of Orthodox Christians who go to confession only once a year—or maybe even never. Like people who never go to the doctor, what that means is that you think everything is perfectly fine and you need no help. Literally, it means that you do not think you need the gift of forgiveness that comes in the sacrament of absolution.

I don't know about you, but I'm a sinner. I mean, I sin every day. I have a problem. I'm a sinner. I need to confront

my sins directly in confession. And I want the sacrament of absolution that goes with it.

I try to go once during each of the four fasts (though I will admit that I don't always keep my rule very well), and I always dread going before I go, because I don't like thinking about how I am a sinner. And then I always wonder what took me so long after I go. It's really wonderful, actually.

Thank God for confession.

14. READ A SPIRITUAL BOOK.

There are few things that get us into another story, another way of looking at life, like a good book. And a good spiritual book can help to retrain your mind to become like the mind of Christ. Most of us do not have the mind of Christ. We have the mind of something else. Our minds are filled with distractions, necessities and the cares of this world.

But the extended meditation on what is good and true and beautiful that can come from a good spiritual book can help to change all that. And you know what? That change helps to bring us peace. And that's something that each of us needs a whole lot more of.

Okay, so those are some of my ideas for ways to change positively in the new year.

What are yours?



COLISEUM CORNER

Thanks to all the coliseum volunteers, Holy Cross earned around \$9,000 this year, with the grand total of \$43,5000 from the last four years toward the building fund! Glory to God! Without you, none of this would be possible.

We would like to acknowledge:

- The coordinators (2012-2015): Jim & Faith Abraham, Willard & Sue Brown, April Ragan, and Yola Hattle.

- The dedicated managers (2015): Willard & Sue Brown, Charles & Betsey Davis, Steve Iltis, April Ragan, Karen Brudnak Slate, and Richard Smith.
- The wonderful teen volunteers (2015): Ian King, Hayden Mullikin, Anderson Ragan and Cecilia Wadford

and

- The fabulous team members (2015): Darlene Boan, Carrie Foley, Fr. Christopher Foley, John Hattle, Ana Iltis, Daniel Johnson, Dean Stikleather, Becki King, Greg King, Dan Kowalcheck, Peggy Kusenberg, Barbara Lawrence, Kevin Lawrence, Cathy Nemtsov, Nika Pcsolyar, Claude Ragan, Caleb Shoemaker, Emily Shoemaker, Natalya Smith, Lynn Thompson, Sarah Wadford, Josh Weesner, and Mariana Weil.

Thank you again for being a team member of the Holy Cross Coliseum Volunteers. God bless!



ANNOUNCEMENTS

Annual Meeting: Mark your calendars. Our Annual Parish Meeting is scheduled for Sunday, January 31 after coffee hour. It is expected that all voting members of the Parish attend this meeting. It is here that we review the budget for the coming year, hear reports, vote for the parish council and will hear an update on the Capital Campaign. The agenda and proposed budget will be sent out ahead of time. Please make plans to attend.

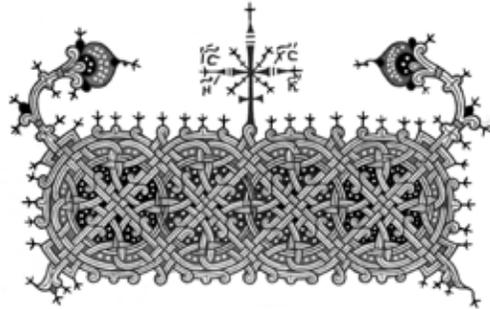
House Blessings: It's that time again - house blessing season! If you would like Fr. Christopher to bless your house this year please sign up for one of the Sunday or Wednesday slots at Church or email Fr. Christopher for a different time during the week. This is a wonderful tradition using the newly blessed water from Theophany asking the Lord to bless your home and your family for the coming year.

Sisterhood Meeting: The Sisterhood will meet on January 19th at 6:30 p.m..

Men's Group Meeting: The Men's Group will meet at 7:00PM on Thursday, January 28th.

Open Door Ministry - We will be serving Open Door at 5:00PM on January 22nd.

Order Gift Cards Through Holy Cross! Scrip cards are available from hundreds of retailers and don't cost any more than the face value of the gift card. It's a "free" fundraiser to benefit the Holy Cross building fund! Contact Karen Brudnak-Slate.



YEAR END FINANCIAL SUMMARY

(Expense figures are preliminary. Figures do not include the Capital Campaign or Building Fund.)

	Actual	Budgeted
Income	\$118,381.10	\$127,100.00
Expense	\$100,672.14	\$103,584.89

Our largest Expense that was over budget was 'Building and Grounds'. Over budget by \$1194 due to Electricity costs and the cost of taking down the wall, which was not budgeted for.

Thanks for your support!



HOLY CROSS ORTHODOX CHURCH



Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2 5 PM Great Vespers
3 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy	4	5 THEOPHANY 6:30PM Vespers Liturgy with Great Blessing of the Waters	6	7 7PM Cat- echism Class	8 7PM OCAT Home Meeting	9 5PM Great Vespers
10 9:00AM Baptisms and Chris- mations of the Shaler family 10AM Divine Liturgy 11:30AM Outdoor Blessing of the Waters. 4PM Hickory Vespers	11	12	13 6:30PM House Blessings	14 6PM Parish Council	15	16 5PM Great Vespers
17 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy 2PM House Blessings	18	19 6:30PM Sisterhood	20 6:30PM House Blessings	21	22 5PM Open Door	23 5PM Great Vespers
24 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy 2PM House Blessings	25	26	27 6:30PM House Blessings	28 7PM Men's Group	29	30
31 9:40AM Hours 10AM Divine Liturgy 12:30 Annual Parish Meeting 2PM House Blessings						

